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ABSTRACT

A game based on Parker Brothers' "Monopoly" provides a teaching device which helps technical writing students learn to arrange their scientific knowledge logically so that their report conclusions seem inevitable. Each of eight previously written reports is divided into four segments which are then substituted for the properties on the game board. Game objectives are to acquire report segments which are both effective as self-contained units and functional as parts of the total report, and to acquire all four segments comprising a report. With a few exceptions, the game is played according to the standard "Monopoly" rules. Students who recognize coherence and pertinent detail bargain for possession of the four parts of a totally good report. At the end of the game, assets are totaled. Student and teacher evaluations show "Report Monopoly" to be highly successful in generating active learning involvement, in broadening perspectives, and in achieving these objectives within a brief time period. (JM)

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REPORT MONOPOLY: THE HOTTEST GAME IN TOWN

In the ten years I have taught technical report-writing, I have frequently raced with pedagogical doom--that is, reaching the end of the course without approaching the catalogued goal: a long, formal report on a subject related to the student's major field of study. Because of the background and predilection of most technical report-writing students, so much class time must be spent on the mechanics and strategies of writing that the concept of the total report as a document on which decisions may be based often gets lost. Students may learn to write a perfect Introduction, an effective Methods and Procedure paper, a literate Discussion, and a well-organized Conclusions and Recommendations section--without achieving cohesiveness between the parts or demonstrating the cumulative effect of systematically arranged ideas. And when they turn in what they hope is their final effort, they are apt to submit nothing more than a collection of short papers loosely connected by headings and bound together under one cover.

Fortunately, whenever I am tempted to settle for something less than a well-integrated, logically developed report, my pride badgers me unmercifully. After a decade of working out formats for reports on everything from the causes of alcoholism amongst the clergy to the feasibility of catfish-farming in Indiana, I am vain about my ability to sift a random assortment of facts and extract

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the essence of a purposeful survey, causal analysis, or proposal; and I am everlastingly alert for opportunities to display and teach this skill.

Moreover, after a decade of teaching report-writing, I am bedeviled by conscience each time I recognize the "separate papers" syndrome but try to ignore it. Experience has taught me that, while few technical writing students will become literary scholars, most are as capable of close-reasoning as the keenest English majors; and if I do not require them to learn to arrange their technical or scientific knowledge in such a way that their conclusions seem inevitable, I deny them one of the benisons of higher education: the opportunity to exercise those ratiocinative powers which distinguish men from other animals.

During a recent, harried semester I came perilously close to betraying both pride and conscience. At mid-term my section of English 421 was still in Comma-splice Land. As difficult as it had originally been to lure students into this morass, it was now virtually impossible to move them out of it and toward the long report. Not only did the foresters cling to tenuous trunks of debate on the respective merits of the semi-colon and period as marks of terminal punctuation; the electrical engineering technologists developed a lichen-like attachment to the handbook section of their texts and at the beginning of every class, presented lists of "doubtful cases." Ahead of us were still four short papers, several weeks of lectures and exercises on the interpretation of data and preparation of graphic

aids, one extremely important unit on standards and specifications, a survey of preliminary materials and appendices, and--of course--the long report. Clearly, both the class and I needed an extraordinary teaching aid.

I began consciously to seek a ploy that would blast people out of Punctuation Gulch and into Holistic Thinking. I wanted students to develop a "forest" perspective--one that would make them conscious of the consequences of vague statements of purpose, irrelevant data, logical fallacies, and misleading transitions; one that would cause them to look critically at their own recently completed report outlines; and one that would inspire them to re-study their notes and textbook in the light of their relevance to the project at hand. And, because our schedule would permit a divagation of no more than three class periods, I wanted Instant Learning.

The Answer: Report Monopoly

What I came up with was Report Monopoly--a game which might be formally described as a "device to help report-writing students judge the merits of a formal report on the basis of: 1) coherence within the total document; and 2) the document's effectiveness as an aid to decision-making." I chose a game as the basis of my innovation because I felt that, at that point in the semester, the class needed something a good deal more energizing than a guest lecture (even a space man!), a field trip, a new text, or additional outside reading. I chose Parker Brothers' Monopoly as the particular game to be used because

over the years I have found Monopoly a least common denominator amongst American youth. The interests and attitudes of college students fluctuate wildly from one entering class to another, but it is a rare young person who has not at least heard of Boardwalk and Park Place.

A General Description of the Game

Because Report Monopoly was devised to aid in learning report-writing, it had, of course, to be played with reports. From reports written during the previous semester, I selected eight,[1] dividing each one into four more or less natural segments. I adapted a Monopoly board for use by substituting thirty-two report segments for the twenty-two "properties" (or eight blocks) featured in the original Parker Brothers game.

The stated objects of the game were: 1) to acquire report segments that were both viable as self-contained units and functional as parts of a total report; and 2) to acquire all four segments of wholly good or bad reports. Inasmuch as the fixed values of segments (established by me) were not disclosed until the end of the game, both skill and knowledge were required for discerning effective parts and wholes.

Directions for Play

Several days before the game was played, each student was given

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[1] Following are the titles of the eight reports used: The Conversion of a Mechanical Clock Assembly Line to a Digital Clock Assembly Line; A Design for a Photoelectric Garage-Door Opener; A feasibility Survey of Fusion as a Source of Commercial Power; A Management Plan for the Doe Woods; The Development of a Memory Phase Lock Loop; A Plan for the Regeneration of Yellow Poplar in Henderson Woods; A Program for Weed Control in a Black Walnut Plantation; and A Design for a Digital Frequency Counter.

copies of all thirty-two segments and instructed to study these carefully, making conclusions about the effectiveness of each segment as well as the impact of the total report of which it was a part. The day before the game was played, each student was assigned three of the thirty-two segments, which he might purchase from the banker at the outset of play if he wished. If the assignee did not wish to purchase segments assigned to him, he might return any or all to the banker, who, at the beginning of actual play, auctioned them off.

The rules of Parker Brothers' Monopoly were observed with the following exceptions:

> All segments cost $200. All commanded a "consultant fee" ("rent" in the original game) or $25. All "blocks of stock" ("houses" in the original game) cost $200. All "holding companies" ("hotels" in the original game) cost four "blocks of stock," plus $200.
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> Players had to own all four segments of a report before issuing blocks of stock.
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> Five minutes before the end of the game (approximately ten minutes before the end of the class period), play was halted and players were allowed to buy and sell segments as fast as they could reach agreement. They then totaled up their assets.
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> After everyone had totaled up his or her assets, the Bonus List was posted.[2] This list awarded $4000 to a specific report that had been adjudged totally good; $1500 to a report that had three good segments; $1000 to a report with two good segments; $500 to a report with one good segment; and as a booby prize, $2000 to a report that had no good segments.

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[2]The fact that bonuses existed was announced before the game; but the value of specific reports was not revealed until play had ceased.

An Evaluation

In actual play, the students who had learned to recognize coherence and pertinent detail (or the lack of it) engaged in "wheeling and dealing" to gain possession of the four parts of a totally good report. The less perceptive students, however, found chance an occasional ally and played enthusiastically simply because they enjoyed the fun of the gaming. After learning specific bonus values, some of the very poorest players were moved to open their textbooks and study--for the first time, probably--the exemplary reports in the appendix.

In a de-briefing period, students were asked to speculate on why certain papers were deemed more effective than others and to formulate minimum standards of effectiveness for reports. The unit then culminated in an assignment to formulate standards and specifications for an innovative teaching device for a report-writing class and to use these in written evaluation of Report Monopoly. In their papers the students repeatedly made the point that the game was a welcome break in routine. (Any neighborhood now looked better than Punctuation Gulch!) A few especially introspective students observed that they weren't sure how much learning they had done during actual play because they had "played for blood," but even these felt that the time spent in evaluating reports before play and checking judgments afterwards had resulted in more learning at a faster pace than they had managed before the game. Innumerable

students spoke of the benefits of inspecting an assortment of student reports and thereby discovering alternatives to the schemes of organization they had developed in their outlines. Two students claimed the game had called their attention to non sequiturs in projected segments of their own papers, and nearly all were loud in their denunciation of the game report which claimed in the Conclusions and Recommendations to have fulfilled the Statement of Purpose but had, in fact, gone off on a sharp and bewildering tangent. On a scale of 1 to 10, ninety percent (or eighteen) of the students rated the game's effectiveness 8, 9, or 10. The most frequently voiced adverse criticism was that a fifty-minute period was not long enough for play, even when the rules for a short game of Monopoly were followed.[3]

I myself was smugly satisfied with the results of the game. In the next regularly scheduled conferences I found my students arriving at the office with a statement of their report's weaknesses already on their lips or in their hands. During every preceding semester, at least one person has come to his final conference averring that he wished he knew exactly what I wanted. In vain have I assured the Lost Soul that unity, coherence, and logic should be paramount aims and that his own paper fell wide of the mark because

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[3]Five people made a plea for establishing several sets of reports and a number of Monopoly boards in a corner of my office, where people could play the game at their leisure--maybe even convert a certain number of winning scores into extra credit. I am considering the proposal.

--let us say--his Introduction promised an analysis of the failure of a home security system but his Recommendations contained nothing more than an advertising blurb for a new and untested alarm. To my vast relief not one student who had participated in Report Monopoly arrived at the final conference without an apparently clear understanding of what he had to do to improve his report or what he had already done to make the paper promising.

In summary, I found Report Monopoly a highly successful teaching innovation because: 1) it generated a degree of involvement that precluded wool-gathering; 2) it broadened perspectives and assured the forest of at least as much attention as the trees; 3) it achieved these objectives within only a few days, thereby approximating my goal of Instant Learning.--And, if all these prizes did not make the game worth the candles burned as I adapted boards and collated reports, then a student's backhanded compliment most <u>certainly</u> did:

> "I never thought I'd have that kind of fun
> in an English class!"